CHAPTER 9

The Decline and Fall of Buddhism.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar had written "The Decline and Fall of Buddhism", as a part of the treatise, 'Revolution and Counter-Revolution'. We have found only 5 pages in our papers which were not even corrected. Copy of this essay has been received from Shri S. S. Rege, which shows some corrections in Dr. Ambedkar's handwriting. This essay is of 18 typed pages which is included here.— Editors,

I

The disappearance of Buddhism from India has been a matter of great surprize to everybody who cares to think about the subject and is also a matter of regret. But it lives in China, Japan, Burma, Siam, Annam, Indo-China, Ceylon and parts of Malaya-Archipalego. In India alone, it has ceased to exist. Not only it has ceased to live in India but even the name of Buddha has gone out of memory of most Hindus. How could such a thing have happened ? This is an important question for which there has been no satisfactory answer. Not only there is no satisfactory answer, nobody has made an attempt to arrive at a satisfactory answer. In dealing with this subject people fail to make a very important distinction. It is a distinction between the fall of Buddhism and the decline of Buddhism. It is necessary to make this distinction because the fall of Buddhism is one, the reasons for which are very different from those which brought about its downfall. For the fall is due to quite obvious causes while the reasons for its decline are not quite so obvious.

There can be no doubt that the fall of Buddhism in India was due to the invasions of the Musalmans. Islam came out as the enemy of the '*But'*. The word '*But'* as everybody knows is an Arabic word and means an idol. Not many people however know what the derivation of the word '*But' is 'But'* is the Arabic corruption of Buddha. Thus the origin of the word indicates that in the Moslem mind idol worship

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had come to be identified with the Religion of the Buddha. To the Muslims, they were one and the same thing. The mission to break the idols thus became the mission to destroy Buddhism. Islam destroyed Buddhism not only in India but wherever it went. Before Islam came into being Buddhism was the religion of Bactria, Parthia, Afghanistan, Gandhar and Chinese Turkestan, as it was of the whole of Asia.[1] In all these countries Islam destroyed Buddhism. As Vicent Smith[2] points out :

> "The furious massacre perpetrated in many places by Musalman invaders were more efficacious than Orthodox Hindu persecutions, and had a great deal to do with the disapperance of Buddhism in several provinces (of India),"

Not all will be satisfied with this explanation. It does seem inadequate. Islam attacked both, Bramhanism and Buddhism. It will be asked why should one survive and the other perish. The argument is plausible but not destructive of the validity of the thesis. To admit that Bramhanism survived, it does not mean that the fall of Buddhism was not due to the sword of Islam. All that it means is that, there were circumstances which made it possible for Bramhanism and impossible for Buddhism to survive the onslaught of Islam. Fortunately for Bramhanism and unfortunately for Buddhism that was the fact.

Those who will pursue the matter will find that there were three special circumstances which made it possible for Bramhanism and impossible for Buddhism to survive the calamity of Muslim invasions. In the first place Bramhanism at the time of the Muslim invasions had the support of the State. Buddhism had no such support. What is however more important is the fact that this State support to Bramhanism lasted till Islam had become a quiet religion and the flames of its original fury as a mission against idolatory had died out. Secondly the Buddhist priesthood perished by the sword of Islam and could not be resusciated. On the other hand it was not possible for Islam to annihilate the Bramhanic priesthood. In the third place the Buddhist laity was persecuted by the Bramhanic rulers of India and to escape this tyranny the mass of the Buddhist population of India embraced Islam and renounced Buddhism.

Of these circumstances there is not one which is not supported by history.

Among the Provinces of India which came Under Muslim domination, Sind was the first. It was ruled by a Shudra king. But the throne was usurped by a Brahmin who established his own dynasty

[1] Modern researches go to show that Buddhism had spread over Europe and that the Cells in Britain were Buddhist—Sec "Buddhism in pre-Christian Britain" by Donald A. Mackenzie.

[2] Early History of India (1924) pages.

which naturally supported the Brahmnic religion at the time of the invasion of Sind by Ibne Kassim in 712 A.D. The ruler of Sind was Dahir. This Dahir belonged to the dynasty of Brahmin rulers.

Heuen Tsang had noticed that the Punjab was in his time ruled by a Kshatriya Buddhist dynasty. This dynasty ruled Punjab till about 880 A.D. In that year the throne was usurped by a Brahmin army commander by name Lalliya who founded the Brahmin Shahi dynasty. This dynasty ruled the Punjab from 880 A.D. to 1021 A.D. It will thus be seen that at the time when the invasions of the Punjab were commenced by Sabuktagin and Mohammad, the native rulers belonged to the Bramhanic religion and Jayapala (960-980 A.D.) Anandpal (980-1000 A.D.) and Trilochanpal (1000-21 A.D.) of whose struggles with Sabuktagin and Mahammad we read so much were rulers belonging to the Bramhanic faith.

Central India began to be infested by Muslim invasions which commenced from the time of Mohammad and continued under the leadership of Shahabuddin Ghori. At that time Central India consisted of different kingdoms. Mewad (now known as Udepur) ruled by the Gulohits, Sambhar (now divided into Bundi, Kota and Sirohi) ruled by the Chauhans, Kanauj[1] ruled by the Pratihars, Dhar ruled by the Parmars, Bundelkhand ruled by Chandellas, Anhilwad ruled by the Chavdas, Chedi ruled by the Kalachuris. Now the rulers of all these kingdoms were Rajputs and the Rajputs for reasons which are mysterious and which I will discuss later on had become the staunchest supporters of the Bramhanic religion.

'About the time of these invasions Bengal had fallen into two kingdoms, Eastern and Western. West Bengal was ruled by the Kings of the Pal dynasty and East Bengal was ruled by the Kings of the Sena dynasty.

The Palas were Kshatriyas. They were Buddhist but as Mr. Vadiya says[2] "probably only in the beginning or in name". As to the Sena kings there is a difference of opinion. Dr. Bhandarkar says they were Brahmins who had taken to the military profession of the Kshatriyas. Mr. Vaidya insists that the Sena Kings were Aryan Kshatriyas or Rajputs belonging to the Lunar race. In any case there is no doubt that the Senas like the Rajputs were supporters of the orthodox faith.[3]

"South of the river Nerbudda, then existed about the time of the Muslim invasions four kingdoms (1) The Deccan Kingdom of Western Chalukyas, (2) The Southern Kingdom of the Cholas (3) The Silahara

[1] Nothing remains of Kanauj. It was completely destroyed by Mohammad although it was most gallantly defended by Prithviraj.

[2] History of Medieval Hindu India Vol, II. p. 142.

[3] Ibid Vol, III. Chap. x.

Kingdom in Konkan on the West Coast and (4) The Ganga Kingdom of Trikalinga on the East Coast. These Kingdoms flourished during 1000-1200 A.D. which is the period of the Muslim invasions. There were under them, certain feudatory Kingdons which rose to power in the 12th Century A.D. and which became independent and powerful in the 13 the Century. They are (1) Devagiri ruled by the Yadavas, (2) Warangal ruled by Kakatiyas (3) Halebid ruled by Hoyasalas (4) Madura ruled by the Pandyas and (5) Travancore ruled by the Cheras.

All these ruling dynasties were followers of orthodox Brahmanism.

The Muslim invasions of India commenced in the year 1001 A.D. The last wave of these invasions reached Southern India in 1296 A.D. when Allauddin Khilji subjugated the Kingdom of Devagiri. The Muslim conquest of India was really not completed by 1296. The wars of subjugation went on between the Muslim conquerors and the local rulers who though defeated were not reduced. But the point which requires to bear in mind is that during this period of 300 years of Muslim Wars of conquests, India was governed all over by princes who professed the orthodox faith of Bramhanism. Bramhanism beaten and battered by the Muslim Invaders could look to the rulers for support and sustenance and did get it. Buddhism beaten and battered by the Muslim invaders had no such hope. It was an uneared for orphan and it withered in the cold blast of the native rulers and was consumed in the fire lit up by the conquerors.

The Musalman invaders sacked the Buddhist Universities of Nalanda, Vikramasila, Jagaddala, Odantapuri to name only a few. They raised to the ground Buddhist monasteries with which the country was studded. The Monks fled away in thousands to Napal, Tibet and other places outside India. A very large number were killed outright by the Muslim commanders. How the Buddhist priesthood perished by the sword of the Muslim invaders has been recorded by the Muslim historians themselves. Summarizing the evidence relating to the slaughter of the Budhist Monks perpetrated by the Musalman General in the course of his invasion of Bihar in 1197 A.D. Mr. Vincent Smith says[1] :

> "The Musalman General, who had already made his name a terror by repeated plundering expeditions in Bihar, seized the capital by a daring stroke. The almost contemporary historian met one of the survivors of the attacking party in A.D. 1243, and learned from him that the Fort of Bihar was seized by a party of only two hundred horsemen, who boldly rushed the postern gate and gained possession of the place. Great quantities of plunder were obtained,

[1] Early History of India (1924) pp. 419-420.

and the slaughter of the 'shaven headed Brahmans' that is to say the Buddhist monks, was so thoroughly completed, that when the victor sought for some one capable of explaining the contents of the books in the libraries of the monasteries, not a living man could be found who was able to read them. 'It was discovered' we are told, 'that the whole of that fortress and city was a college, and in the Hindi tongue they call a college Bihar."

Such was the slaughter of the Buddhist priesthood perpetrated by the Islamic invaders. The axe was struck at the very root. For by killing the Buddhist priesthood Islam killed Buddhism. This was the greatest disaster that befell the religion of Buddha in India. Religion like any other ideololgy can be attained only by propaganda. If propoganda fails, religion must disappear. The priestly class, however detestable it may be, is necessary to the sustenance of religion. For it is by its propoganda that religion is kept up. Without the priestly class religion must disappear. The sword of Islam fell heavily upon the priestly class. It perished or it fled outside India. Nobody remained to keep the flame of Buddhism burning.

It may be said that the same thing must have happened to the Brahmanic priesthood. It is possible, though not to the same extent. But there is this difference between the constitution of the two religions and the difference is so great that it contains the whole reason why Brahmanism survived the attack of Islam and why Buddhism did not. This difference relates to the constitution of the clergy.

The Brahmnic priesthood has a most elaborate organization. A clear and succinct account of it has been given by the late Sir Ramkrishna Bhandarkar in the pages of the Indian Antiquary.[1]

'Every Brahmanic family,' he writes, 'is devoted to the study of a particular Veda, and a particular Sakha (recension) of a Veda; and the domestic rites of the family are performed according to the ritual described in the Sutra connected with that Veda. The study consists in getting by heart the books forming the particular Veda. In Northern India, where the predominant Veda is the White Yagush and the Sakha that of the Madhyandinas, this study has almost died out, except at Banaras, where Brahmanic families from all parts of India are settled. It prevails to some extent in Gujarat, but to a much greater extent in the Maratha country; and in Tailangana there is a large number of Brahmans who still devote their life to this study. Numbers of these go about to all parts of the country in search of dakshina (fee, alms), and all well-to-do natives patronize them according to their means, by getting them to repeat portions of

[1] Indian Antiquary 1874. p. 132 quoted by Max Muller. Hibbert Lectures (1878) pp. 162-164.

their Veda, which is mostly the Black Yagush, with Apastamba for their Sutra. Hardly a week passes here in Bombay in which no Tailangana Brahman comes to me to ask for dakshina. On each occasion I get the men to repeat what they have learned, and compare it with the printed texts in my possession.

'With reference to their occupation, Brahmans of each Veda are generally divided into two daises, Grihasthas and Bhikshukas. The former devote themselves to a worldly avocation, while the latter spend their time in the study of their sacred books and the practice of their religious rites.

'Both these classes have to repeat daily the Sandhya-vandana or twilight-prayers, the forms of which are somewhat different for the different Vedas. But the repetition of the Gayatri-mantra 'Tat Savitur Vareynam' etc., five, then twenty eight, or a hundred and eight times, which forms the principal portion of the ceremony, is common to all.

'Besides this, a great many perform daily what is called Brahmayagna, which on certain occasions is incumbent on all. This for the Rig-Veda consists of the first hymn of the first mandal, and the opening sentences of the-Aitareya Brahmana, the five parts of the Aitereya Aranyaka, the Yagus-samhita, the Sama-samhita, the Atharva-samhita, Asvalayana Kalpa Sutra, Nirukta, Khandas, Nighantu, Jyotisha, Siksha, Panini, Yagnavalkya Smriti, Mahabharata, and the Sutras of Kanada, Jaimini, and Badarayan.'

The point to be remembered is that in the matter of officiation there is no distinction between a Bhikshuka[1] and a Grahastha. In Brahmanism both are priest and the Grahastha is no less entitled to officiate as a priest than a Bhikshu is. If a Grahastha does not choose to officiate as a priest, it is because he has not mastered the mantras and the ceremonies or because he follows some more lucrative vocation. Under Brahmanic dispensation every Brahmin who is not an outcast has the capacity to be a priest. The Bhikshuka is an actual priest, a Grahastha is a potential priest. All Brahmins can be recruited to form the army of Bramhanic priesthood. Further no particular training or initiation ceremony is necessary for a Brahmin to act as a priest. His will to officiate is enough to make him function as a priest. In Brahmanism the priesthood can never become extinct. Every Brahmin is a potential priest of Brahmanism and be drafted in service

[1]The Bhikshuks (under Bramhanism) are further sub-divided into (1) Vaidikas (2) Yajniks (3) Srotriyas and (4) Agnihotris. Vaidikas are those who learn the Vedas by heart and repeat them without a mistake. Yajnikas are those who perform Yajnas and other religious rites and ceremonies. Srottiyas are those who specialize in the art of performing great sacrifices, Agnihotris are those who maintain the three sacrificial fires and perform the Ishtis (fortnightly sacrifices) and Chaturmasyas (sacrifices to be performed every four months).

when the need be. There is nothing to stop the rake's life and progress. This is not possible in Buddhism. A person must be ordained in accordance with established rites by priests already ordained, before he can act as a priest. After the massacre of the Buddhist priests, ordination became impossible so that the priesthood almost ceased to exist. Some attempt was made to fill the depleted ranks of the Buddhist priests. New recruits for the priesthood had to be drawn from all available sources. They certainly were not the best. According to Haraprasad Shastri,[1]

> "The paucity of Bhiksus brought about a great change in the composition of the Buddhist priesthood. It was the married clergy with families, who were called Aryas, that took the place of the Bhiksus proper, and began to cater to the religious needs of the Buddhists generally. They commenced attaining the normal status of Bhiksus through the performance of some sacraments. (Intro.pp. 19.7, quoting Tatakara Guptas' Adikarmaracana : 149, pp. 1207-1208). They officiated at the religious ceremonies but at the same time, in addition to their prolusion of priesthood, earned their livelihood through such avocations as those of a mason, painter, sculptor, goldsmith, and carpenter. These artisan priests who were in later times larger in numbers than the Bhiksus proper became the religious guides of the people. Their avocations left them little time and desire for the acquisition of learning, for deep thinking, or for devotion to Dhyana and other spiritual exercises. They could not be expected to raise the declining Buddhism to a higher position through their endeavours nor could they check its course towards its ruin through the introduction of salutary reforms."

It is obvious that this new Buddhist priesthood had neither dignity nor learning and were a poor match for the rival, the Brahmins whose cunning was not unequal to their learning.[2]

The reason why Brahmanism rose from the ashes and Buddhism did not, is to be accounted for, not by any inherent superiority of Brahmanism over Buddhism. It is to be found in the peculiar character of their priesthood. Buddhism died because its army of priests died and it was not possible to create. Though beaten it was never completely broken. Every Brahmin alive became priest and took the place of every Brahmin priest who died.

[1] Summary of his views by Narendra Nath Law in Harprasad Shastri Memorial Volume pp. 363-64.

[2] The reason why the new Buddhist priest could not leave their avocations and devote themselves wholly to the propagation of religion is because as Harprasad Shastri points out. "The decrease in the number of Buddhist laity also resulted in the difficulty of Buddhist monks to receive alms. As a monk could not take alms from more than three householders and could not visit the same household within a month for the same purpose, ninety household are necessary to maintain a monk". Harprasad Shastri Memorial Volume. p.362.

As to the conversion to the faith of Islam by the Buddhist population as a cause of the fall of Buddhism, there can hardly be much doubt.

In his Presidential address to the early Medieval and Rajput section of the Indian History Congress held at Allahabad in 1938, Prof. Surendra Nath Sen very rightly observed that there were two problems relating to the Medieval History of India for which no satisfactory answers were forthcoming as yet. He mentiond two: one connected with the origin of the Rajputs and the other to the distribution of the Muslim population in India. Referring to the second, he said:

> "But I may be permitted to deal with one question that is not wholly of antiquarian interest today. The distribution of Muslim population in India demands some explanation. It is commonly believed that Islam followed the route of conquest and the subjugated people were forced to accept the faith of their rulers. The predominance of the Muslims in the Frontier Province and the Punjab lends some colour to this contention. But this theory cannot explain an overwhelming Muslim majority in Eastern Bengal. It is quite likely that the North-Western Frontier Province was peopled by Turkish folks during the Kushan days, and their easy conversion to Islam may be explained by racial affinity with the new conquerors; but the Muslims of Eastern Bengal are certainly not racially akin to the Turks and the Afghans, and the conversion of the Hindus of that region must have been due to other reasons."[1]

What are these other reasons ? Prof. Sen then proceeds to lay bare these reasons which are found in Muslim Chronicles. He takes the case of Sind for which there is direct testimony and says :[2]

> "According to the Chachnama, the Buddhists of Sind suffered all sorts of indignities and humiliations under their Brahman rulers, and when the Arabs invaded their country, the Buddhists lent their whole hearted suport to them. Later on, when Dahir was slain and a Muslim Government was firmly established in his country, the Buddhists found to their dismay that, so far as their rights and privileges were concerned, the Arabs were prepared to restore status quo ante bellum and even under the new order the Hindus received a preferential treatment. The only way out of this difficulty was to accept Islam because the converts were entitled to all the privileges reserved for the ruling classes. So the Buddhists of Sind joined the Muslim fold in large numbers."

Prof. Sen then adds this significant passage :

[1]Early Career of Kanhoji Angria and other papers, pp. 188-89.

[2]*Ibid*. pp. 188-89.

> "It cannot be an accident that the Punjab, Kashmir, the district around Behar Sharif, North-East Bengal where Muslims now predominate, were all strong Buddhist Centres in the pre-Muslim days. It will not be fair to suggest that the Buddhists succumbed more easily to political temptations than the Hindus and the change of religion was due to the prospects of the improvement of their political status."

Unfortunately the causes that have forced the Buddhist population of India to abandon Buddhism in favour of Islam have not been investigated and it is therefore impossible to say how far the persecution of the Brahmanic Kings was responsible for the result. But there are not wanting indications which suggest that this was the principal cause. We have positive evidence of two Kings engaged in the campaign of persecuting the Buddhist population.

The first to be mentioned is Mihirkula. He belonged to the Huns who invaded India about 455 A.D. and established their kingdom in Northern India with Sakala, the modern Sialkot in the Punjab as the capital. Mihirkula ruled about 528 A.D. As Vincent Smith says:[1]

> "All Indian traditions agree in representing Mihirkula as a blood thirsty tyrant. 'The Attila of India', stained to a more than ordinary degree with 'implicable cruelty' noted by historians as characteristic of the Hun temperament."

Mihirkula, to use the language of Smith,[2] :- "exhibited ferocious hostility against the peaceful Buddhist cult, and remorselessly overthrew the *stupas* and monasteries, which he plundered of their treasures".

The other is Sasanka, the King of Eastern India. He ruled about the first decade of the seventh century and was defeated in a conflict with Harsha. In the words of Vincent Smith[3]

> "Sansanka, who has been mentioned as the treacherous murderer of Harsha's brother, and probably was a scion of the Gupta dynasty, was a worshipper of Shiva, hating Buddhism, which he did his best to extirpate. He dug up and burnt the holy Bodhi tree at Buddha Gaya, on which, according to legend, Asoka had lavished inordinate devotion; broke the stone marked with the footprints of Buddha at Pataliputra; destroyed the convents, scattered the monks, carrying his persecutions to the foot of the Nepalese hills".

The seventh century seems to be a century of religious persecution in India. As Smith points out:[4]

[1] Early History of India (1924) p. 336.

[2] Ibid p. 337.

[3] Ibid p. 360.

[4] Ibid F. N. p. 214.

"A terrible persecution of the cognate religion Jainism occurred in Southern India in the seventh century".

Coming nearer to the time of the Muslim invasions, we have the instance of Sindh where presecution was undoutedly the cause. That these persecutions continued upto the time of the Muslim invasions may be presumed by the fact that in Northern India the Kings were either Brahmins or Rajputs both of whom were anti Buddhists. That the Jains were persecuted even in the 12th century is amply supported by history. Smith refers to Ajayadeva, a Saiva King of Gujarat who came to the throne in A.D. 1174-6 and began his reign by a merciless persecution of the Jains, torturing their leader to death. Smith adds, "Several other well-established instances of severe persecution might be cited."

There is therefore nothing to vitiate the conclusion that the fall of Buddhism was due to the Buddhist becoming coverts to Islam as a way of escaping the tyranny of Brahmanism. The evidence, if it does not support the conclusion, at least makes it probable. If it has been a disaster, it is a disaster for which Brahmanism must thank itself.

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